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ABSTRACT

The complexity of language use can be illustrated by the storytelling of three different language users. The first is a college freshman, retelling a story in three different situations. In a test-like situation, her language is short and choppy, whereas in more natural settings involving family and friends, her language is more spontaneous. In the test situation, she fully develops a few centers of interest, while in the less formal settings she tells what interests her most. In the case of the second subject, a black adolescent beginning reader, his first story--told to a tutor in a friendly atmosphere--is spontaneous and rich in centers of interest. His second story, told in a different social setting for the purpose of providing reading material, is short, choppy, and dull, and reflects his experiences with reading instruction. The third subject, a six-year-old, says that people write at school to learn their letters and words, and they write at home because they like to do so. If teachers want to discover their students' potential, they must let them write, read, and tell stories limited only by their own linguistic resources, rather than by the teacher's restrictions imposed upon them. (HTH)

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Comprehension in Context: Social and Situational Influences on Story Retellings

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Presentation given by R. Kay Moss at the 27th Annual Convention of the International Reading Association, Chicago, April 28, 1982.

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One of my mentors, Donna Wiseman, has a son who was reading a story about a sick giraffe from which this page was taken.

Chris read, "Then she wrapped a towel around his neck and put him to bed. "Now, maybe I can have some peace," she said. When Burton's father came home from a business trip, he sniffed and said, "I smell goose grease. I hate goose grease!" The giraffe said, "Oh, sorry." and, unconcerned, went on to the next page.

Since this was not an uncommon response for Chris, and since she was curious as to what his teacher did in these circumstances, Donna asked her son's teacher if he ever paraphrased portions of the text as he read aloud.

Then she wrapped a towel round and round his neck and put him to bed. "Now, maybe I can have some peace," she said.

When Bertram's father came home from a busines· trip, he sniffed and said, "I smell goose grease." He hated goose grease!

"The giraffe has a sore throat," explained Bertram's mother.

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To which the teacher responded, "Oh no, Chris would never do that. He's a good reader."

Though this makes a statement about the teacher's definition of a good reader, it makes a few more interesting statements about Chris in particular, and about language users in general.

Those statements are

First, that language is a complex social event;

Second, that language users are aware of the social nature of language in all of its forms; and

Third, that language users are actively involved in the synthesis of this social event.

Language is a complex social event.

Language users are aware of the social nature of language in all of its forms.

Language users are actively involved in the synthesis of the social event.

In order to explore these statements today; I would like to share some language stories of three different language users.

The first of these is Shannon, a nineteen-year-old freshman studying theatre arts and speech at Texas Women's University.

She reads - a lot.

Her family values reading and the theatre.

She is a good student, and always has been.

Shannon told about a story she had read in three different situations -

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to a university professor,
to her family at dinner, and
to her friend.

Though she knew she was being taped when
she retold the story to the professor,
she was unaware of the tape recorder
in the other two situations.

Essentially what we have is Shannon retelling
a story in a test-like situation, and
two other retellings of the same story
in more natural situations - that is,
more natural for Shannon.

Let me illustrate how these retellings differed.

The retelling to the friend is quite a bit
longer - but after adjusted for all the
extra "chit chat" that goes on between
friends, the length in words is 600, about
the same as the other two situations.

See Table I

Another difference between the 3 story retellings
can be illustrated in terms of idea units.

Speech is not produced in a flowing stream, but
rather in short spurts of language. One
needs to just be aware of this fact to
actually hear these short "spurts" in
someone's speech.

These spurts of language have been noted by
Halliday, who called them information units;
and more recently by Chafe, whose term we
adopt here.

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An idea unit can be identified primarily in three ways:

intonation-by a slight rise in pitch;

hesitation-there's always at least a brief pause, and can be as much as 1 or 2 seconds; and

syntax-they seem to generally be a single clause.

Though the total number is higher in the friend situation, there was a lot of interaction with her friend.

More important is the mean length in words and seconds: in the test situation, her language is short and choppy; whereas in the family and friend setting her language is less fragmented - her own spontaneous speech pattern is exhibited.

A third difference between Shannon's story retellings can be seen by examining the centers of interest.

A center of interest occurs when a speaker's focus is too long to be conveyed in a single idea unit;

so the speaker strings a series of idea units together, each ending with a rising pitch until he reaches the end of his center of interest, and his pitch falls.

In written language this would be comparable to a paragraph.

In the test situation, Shannon fully develops a few centers of interest; whereas in the less formal settings she seems to tell what interests her most.

The most important difference between the retellings can be seen in terms of the purpose behind each of her idea units - that is, why Shannon said what she said.

We identified four primary purposes behind her idea units:

interaction - this is not closely related to the story ("It was pretty long, about 5 pages.");

recall processes - this seemed to be a stalling device ("Well...um...let's see);

retelling - this is where Shannon retold the story events, or in some way portrayed knowledge of the story;

evaluation - this is when Shannon offered some overall statement as to the story's worth.

In Shannon's 3 retellings, she interacted more with her friend and her family; she used more recall processes in the test setting (which could have been because she was

nervous or because she was retelling the story just after she read it); she retold the same amount in all 3 situations - though there are a number of qualitative differences such as telling a moral and character analyses to the professor and telling parts of the story through dialogue to her family and friend, a much more aesthetic stance.

So, maybe, you say, Shannon has just "beat the system" and knows what to tell that professor just because she is a very sophisticated language user.

So allow me to contrast her language story with that of James, a sixteen-year-old Black beginning reader.

James was introduced to me through the probation office of the Brazos County Police. His probation officer described him as "illiterate".

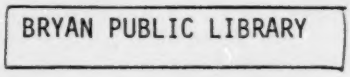
His teachers described him as a "trouble maker".

On our first day of tutoring -- I was part of James' punishment -- we drove around his downtown neighborhood and I asked him to read anything he knew.

He read "Turn Right" as we sat at a T-intersection;

Text	Support Materials

He read "Bryan Library" on the front of the building; and



He read "Good Rich" from the sign at the tire store.

From his interaction with print I could see that he was not illiterate in that he was interacting with print in his environment with quite a bit of success.

Regardless, the probation officer had said "he can't write his name"; and his teacher had told me "he can't read a lick".

When we got back to the library I turned on the tape recorder and asked James to tell me a story.

The result is "The Basketball Kid".

"This boy he's 15 years old. He always wanted to play basketball. So he went to a Boy's Club and didn't nobody recognize him. And so everybody come up and ask 'What's his name?' He said his name was Wayne. They told him their names. They asked did he want to play basketball? He said, 'Hell no, he don't play with chumps..."

And James goes on to tell a terrific story about Wayne, the Basketball Kid.

For the next several weeks James and I used it

Text	Support Materials

for reading material in our tutoring sessions.

When it was time for some new material, I asked James to tell me a new story.

This time he told "Paperboy vs. Mailman":

"This boy/
was throwing/
newspaper/
every/
this boy throwed newspaper/
every/
day.../

Thrilling isn't it? James plods along to tell about how a mailman runs down this paper-boy with his jeep.

Again, let me show you how different these two stories were.

The first story was quite a bit longer. See Table 2

By looking at the story idea units, we can see what we could hear on tape: the second story was short and choppy - very unlike his first story, which was much more like his spontaneous speech (of approximately 6 words or 3 seconds).

There are more centers of interest in James' first story, and they are developed more

extensively. James doesn't spare words reporting details concerning the setting, characters, or plot in the Basketball Kid; however, the Mailman contained the bare threads of a story line.

In fact, whereas the Basketball Kid has a total of 16 episodes when plotted according to Mandler& Johnson's story grammar, the Mailman story has only one episode.

So the first story is not just longer, it is much more rich in its structure.

The different social setting (me as teacher now, rather than just a friend driving around in a car with him) and the different assignment (tell a story for reading rather than tell a story) restricted James to telling a story that he thought would be appropriate for reading instruction - based on his years of experience with reading material.

In one last language story I'd like to share some writing by my friend Heather, who just turned six.

According to Heather, people write at school to learn their letters and words; and they write at home because they <u>like</u> to - "you know, like letters to people and stuff like that."

Text	Support Materials
Indeed, at school Heather's teacher assigns writing to teach letters and words - you can tell Heather copied these great sentences from the blackboard because first grade teachers are the only people alive who make their Y's that way.	
The same afternoon Heather wrote me a recipe - you do that sort of thing outside of school, you know. This is a recipe for wolf stew -- the three little pigs used it when having a "guest" for dinner.	See recipe
And before that, she even wrote me a joke book.	See joke book
But at six, Heather already has it figured out that the school setting demands a particular type of writing, and at home you can pursue a number of different options.	
And that, ladies and gentlemen, is what this whole thing is about - options.	
Language users, of any age or level of development, have many past experiences related to language learning. Language users perceive the restrictions of the social event - whether these restrictions are teacher-imposed, as in Heather's case; or are self-imposed, based on past instruction, as in the cases of Shannon and James.	
When language users - of any age - are restricted	

by teachers who want to hear just the theme, plot and main characters, by teachers who assign only reading material which is somehow "controlled", or by teachers who assign writing so kids will learn their letters and words, they are restricted to only a small portion of all of the language options otherwise accessible to them.

If we want to see kids' potential, how they deal with the range of options open to them, we have to lift some of the restrictions.

We have to let kids write and read and tell stories limited only by their own linguistic resources, rather then by our own restrictions imposed upon them.

And that's doing what you set out to do: allowing kids to grow and develop.

Don't you think it would be worth it?

TABLE 1

CHARACTERISTICS OF SHANNON'S STORY RETELLINGS
ACROSS THREE DIFFERENT SITUATIONS

	TEST	FAMILY	FRIEND
A. LENGTH			
WORDS	601	771	1038
SECONDS	241	307	418
B. IDEA UNITS			
TOTAL	106	101	140
$\bar{X}$ LENGTH IN WORDS	5.67	7.63	7.42
$\bar{X}$ LENGTH IN SECONDS	2.27	3.04	2.48
C. CENTERS OF INTEREST			
TOTAL	10	27	43
$\bar{X}$ LENGTH IN IDEA UNITS	10.60	3.74	3.26
D. COMMUNICATION PURPOSES			
INTERACT	7	17	60
RECALL	25	3	0
RETELL	74	80	77
EVALUATE	0	1	3

TABLE 2

Characteristics of James' Stories
Across Two Situations

	The Basketball Kid	Mailman vs. Paperboy
A. Length		
words	883	162
seconds	475	151
B. Idea Units		
total	128	60
$\bar{X}$ length in words	6.9	2.7
$\bar{X}$ length in seconds	3.7	1.1
C. Centers of Interest		
total	36	18
$\bar{X}$ Length in words	24.5	9.0

Heather

wof

ChOP
it
up

Botax DOOS
green Bees

Carris
Pees
turmax Doos
and aD wodr

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